

SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract

South Asian women writers have arrived like courageous fighters into the diasporic English literary scene. These women were willing to fight for their rights: the right to have their work published and read, and to help others to do the same by overcoming obstacles of every nature. The research paper deals with various aspects of self and female consciousness as perceived in the novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) of Bharati Mukherjee. The protagonist Tara as a self-possessed and curious woman exhibits a fervent quest for identity and space of her own. The study offers analysis of the protagonist's trajectory. Realization of one's self-identity is a sense of being powerful. The novel is in first person narrative as the protagonist has to retell the family history. The psychological commotion that Tara passes through can be convincingly explained when narrated by the victim herself. The study deals out with different layers of self of the characters in the novels. As in the accomplishment of their assertion of self how they come in conflict with the so-called, so-called codes and norms which largely serve the purpose of patriarchy set up of the society.

Keywords: *Self Actualization, Transformation of Self, Search for Identity in alien land.*

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most influential literary figures of Indian women writers in English who is honoured as the "Grande dame" of diasporic Indian English literature. She is an activist of civil rights, educator, an author of greatly acclaimed novels, two collections of short stories and non-fiction works. She employs her own personal understandings in crossing the cultural boundaries. She is a well-known writer of Indian diaspora in USA, though she expects to be seen as (North) American Writer and rejects her hyphenated identity as Asian-American or Indo-American (Mukherjee, "American Dreamer"). She is the robust voice of the immigrants from all over the world in USA, because of her firm rejection of the emotional paralysis of exile and her affirmation of the immigrant condition. All the heroines of Bharati Mukherjee's go through a transformation in their personality. She herself has said in one of her interviews, "Empowerment meant escaping the identity assigned by ... tradition bound community". Her protagonists show that kind of empowerment in themselves once they realized themselves fully.

Bharati Mukherjee's sixth novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) marks a new trend in her writings. In this novel, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland, living abroad was presented as something to be spurned and total assimilation into the host culture was hailed. It is to create a location of the presence that reduces the diasporic individual to delink the past and deconstruct the future.

Self-Actualization of Women and Female Consciousness

Desirable Daughters is a story that revolves around the three sisters namely Padma, Parvati and Tara. Tara, the central character of the novel narrates the story of the lives of three sisters. She takes the readers deep into the intricacies of her life in America and her past in India. The story of three sisters of a traditional Bengali Brahmin family and their own course of voyage towards their destiny is narrated by one of the sisters, Tara. All the three who belonged to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family were known for their charmness, intellectual, wealth and privileged position in the society. Though three sisters shared their birth date on same, carried different attitude and maintained their own distinct life style.

The author describes Tara Lata, just five years old and is being carried on a palanquin, all decorated in the ceremonial dress to be given away in marriage. Tara, female protagonist, was born and raised in Calcutta but moved to San Francisco at the age of nineteen when her parents arranged a marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a young Indian man studying computer science at Stanford University. In Hindu culture it was authenticated that a father should give away his daughter in marriage before she reaches puberty and if the father is not able to do so he is considered useless and undeserving: In a palanquin borne by four servants sit a rich man's three daughters, the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands tap, golden bracelets tinkle. Tara immediately embraces American culture, taking advantage of the opportunities it affords her and assimilating as best she can to the new society around her.

He had that eagerness, and a confident smile that promised substantial earnings. It lured my father in to marriage negotiations, and it earned my not unenthusiastic acceptance of him as husband. A very predictable, very successful marriage negotiation. (DD 7).

Bish, a software engineer from a prominent Bengali family has a name and fame in America. He tries to lead a traditional Indian life in America and expects the same from Tara. Tara as a self-assertive woman of global time leaves him by her choice, whereas Tara Lata is forced to live an alienated life by fate. Tara Lata turns out to be a freedom fighter and a martyr during the period of colonialism and succeeds in achieving a unique identity for herself in spite of her victimization in the name of tradition. Tara, the globalised modern woman makes herself free from the traditional role of Indian wife to explore the new possibilities of life. Tara seems to find out the analogy of rebellious spirit in her life with that of Tara Lata

The narrative continuous in modern day San Francisco where Tara Lata, the namesake to the Tree-bride, is divorced from her billionaire husband, Bish, and is raising her fifteen year old son, Rabi. Tara and Bish have one son, Rabi, before they eventually divorced, maintaining a close friendship. Tara also preserves close relationships with her two older sisters, Padma (referred to as Didi) and Parvati (the former married and living in Montclair, New Jersey and the latter residing in Bombay with her husband and two children). Despite the distance between them, the sisters are deeply attached with each other.

Tara has a white American lover, Andy, who is a typical former hippie-type who always spouts pseudo-enlightened Buddhist maxims. Tara however enjoys her love-life with Andy because she feels that there is something exotic, something that defies the set norms and structures. Tara swerves away from Indian traditionalism and allows herself to be physically involved with Andy. The divorce was amicable, but the East Indian community has “no language or ceremonies for divorce so the divorce is kind of an open secret, understood but not really acknowledged.”(DD 115)

Tara’s marriage to Bish did not have any immediate distressing effect as earlier experienced by Tara Lata the *Tree-Bride*. While Tara- Lata became a widow by the foul mechanization of fate, Tara leaves her husband by choice in a self-redemptive and self-assured role of a woman of the global era. She falls a prey to her own experiencing of America where the cream-colored houses seem to have tumbled down the hill sides like children’s blocks, or on bright days under a cloudless sky-like cottages in an Etruscan landscape. Here she feels “totally at home, unwilling to leave” (DD43). But her American summer suffers a jolt with a series of dislocations.

Tara wanted to study at the community college, but instead stays at home to take care of her son, just like all of the other young Indian wives in Atherton, California. Believing in the liberating promise of marriage, Tara devotes her entire life in supporting Bish and raising their family, for the importance of fulfilling the domestic responsibilities has been ingrained in her since birth. Tara comes to California expecting to fulfill the role of the traditional Indian wife, but instead realizes that she does not desire to play the typical part in the Indian family drama.

When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of

life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife? In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene ... he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. (DD 82)

Through this novel the novelist depicts the curses of patriarchy and different forms of exploitation upon women. The novelist depicts marriage as the medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss. Tara’s unsuccessful marriage is outcome of imposed marriage. She married a man she had never met. She married Bish because her father told her to get married. She says;

I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market. (DD 26)

Bharati Mukherjee shifts her attention not on “backwardness as an area of darkness, but on her characters growing awareness of the dark spots in their lives and their courage’s efforts to discover areas of light.... A struggle for self-actualization”. (Padma 78). As an individual, Tara enforces her identity as a self-propelled woman by exerting her own will on decisions about her life, “I am free to make a mess of my life, (DD 48)

Tara is living comfortable life until one day a boy appears in her home, Chris Dey who is looking for Tara’s elder sister, Padma. He presents himself to Tara as Didi’s illegitimate son, conceived through an affair with a prominent businessperson named Ronald Dey. Nevertheless, after the revelation of her sister’s pre-marital affair with Ronald Dey, and her having a child by him, she realizes that she cannot escape her past. Moreover, when she thinks of herself in the light of the past, she wonders...“ does she know her family all these years ... or does she even know herself”. She wonders what she really is: a well-protected and safe Bhattacharjee/ Chatterjee or an ordinary person vulnerable to any threat. These are the question that stick her to probe into her past and act on her own to find out answers.

Tara considers her assumptions about her family and begins her quest for reality. It is through this quest only she finds her identity. Her sister denied the fact of having an illegitimate child. She realizes the pernicious intentions of somebody behind Chris Dey’s arrival at her new home, but finds nobody to support her in her search to know the truth. Her lover deserts her for her going to police, her son gets irritated; but despite all this, she takes it upon herself to find out the truth. The Indian police officer assigned to her informs Tara that there is a rash of gangs in the States from India, who prey on Indians with money. She is a very wealthy woman, her son has a huge trust fund, and her husband is the richest Indian in the States. The officers feel her family is a target, perhaps for a kidnapping. Having once been informed of the danger of the Dawood gang looming large, Tara is worried about her ex-husband and son, decides again to be united with her husband, and look after him when he is seriously wounded in the attack of some powerful explosives on her house. However, she tells him of her vision “a vision of discipline and self- knowledge and of misfortune turned to new energy” and thus “the scale of her achievements made it difficult for a wife to set her own sights” (DD 280). Therefore, it clears the fact that she never liked to be shadowed, and now articulates this quite clearly to her male counterparts, without any hesitation. In addition, after that though she does not intend to return to India permanently, the first thing to come to her mind naturally is her “need to see Mummy and Daddy” (DD 277). Thus, the entire novel comes over as an attempt by Tara to explore her own individuality and acknowledge her difference from her two sisters, her family and her community.

Tara in *Desirable Daughters* breaks all shackles of tradition and walks out of the wedlock with her son Rabi choosing a live-in relationship with a Hungarian Buddhist retrofitter and doing volunteer work in a pre-school in san Francisco, all for her self-fulfillment. Through Tara, Bharati Mukherjee voices her belief in the individual’s

liberty and freedom to mould himself, to reconstruct and reshape his identity. She does not believe in a reality that represses and stifles one's self-expression, expectations and one's liberty. After the destruction of her San Francisco house, Tara returns to India. Reunited with her parents, she also returns to more culturally traditional concepts of home and community. Her father has sold the Calcutta house and moved to Rishikesh, entering the prescribed third phase of Hindu life as a Sannyasin. Tara is in search of relocating herself in the trans-national realities. In spite of her liberated attitudes, her desire to construct hybridity, her acceptance of her son's gay sexuality and live in relationships, she fails to outdo the traditional life of Indian women.

In Tara's realization the novel reveals the spaces of tradition, personal memories, places, and life styles, tradition and modernity. She indulges in the nostalgic romanticism of the past, the inverted story of mobility, existential suffering, hybrid-subjectivity and plurality in her physical and psychic dividedness. Tara Lata becomes famous for acts of rebellion and she becomes freedom fighter and martyr. Tara Lata undergoes the process of transformation in the host nation i.e. to say they have to kill the inner self to some extent in order to accept the new persona. *Desirable Daughters* reveals survival strategies at multiple levels ranging from cultural, physical, social and psychological to spiritual levels. Mukherjee's protagonist in *Desirable Daughters* stands at the rim of history and with a peculiar conviction surges ahead for a root search. Here one can see the survival strategy to retain her identity in a pluralistic society by not assimilating but by devising her own ways to articulate her immigrant conditions. This novel makes us to understand the dynamics of shifting personal and ethnic implications in adherence to the authors own ethnic transformation. In Tara's life, it is after many vicissitudes, including a divorce, a roots search and a fire that nearly caused her death that she arrives at a realization of what her true vocation is.

Conclusion

In *Desirable Daughters*, there is a celebration of an evolving self, self that changes constantly when cultural connections are lost, resulting in creation of multiple selves. Throughout the novel, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the identity crisis of its protagonists who is longing for her new self. The three women characters portrayed in the novel *Desirable Daughters* are individualistic, react, to different circumstances in dissimilar ways, and yet there is a gradual process of self-actualization in them that helps them to realize their dreams and overcome the sense of isolation and disillusionment.

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